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‘It was just like we were a family again’: play as a means to maintain family ties for children visiting an imprisoned parent

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Abstract

Children can find the process of visiting a prison traumatic and as a result of parental incarceration, may experience a range of adverse outcomes. When children stay in contact with their imprisoned parent through prison visiting, however, this seems to be a protective factor. This paper reports on a play visits service based at Her Majesty’s Prison (HMP) Leeds, UK. The service provides supervised play work provision for children visiting their father. Data were derived from prisoners and prisoners’ families and were triangulated as a means of achieving a level of validity. The findings reveal that play visits do produce positive outcomes for children and play visits are effective in maintaining and strengthening family ties. These effects may be stronger when compared to standard prison visits, but further research is needed to confirm this.

134 words

Keywords

Prison
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Family ties
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‘It was just like we were a family again’: play as a means to maintain family ties for children visiting an imprisoned parent

Context

Global data on the number of children with a parent in prison is unknown as this information is not routinely collected at national levels. In England and Wales, a recent survey suggested that approximately 200,000 children had a parent in prison (Williams, Papadopoulou, & Booth, 2012) and in the United States, estimates suggest that between 1.7-2.3 million children are effected by parental imprisonment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Johnston, 2012). Prisoners’ children are not a homogenous group (Barnados, 2013); however, evidence clearly shows that the ‘collateral damage’ (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999) caused by parental incarceration is detrimental to children in many ways.

Prison facilities are not geared toward the needs of children, rather prisons have to place to the fore concerns with public safety and thus with prison security (Johnston, 2012; Woodall, Dixey, & South, 2013). Children can find the process of visiting a prison to see their parent traumatic and daunting (Dixey & Woodall, 2012) and children often experience a range of emotions, including anger, shame, guilt and fear (Hart & Clutterbrook, 2008). Longer term, children of imprisoned parents potentially face a myriad of adverse outcomes, including: an increase in the child experiencing stigmatisation and bullying; a decrease in school attendance and attainment; increased mental health problems and an increase in the risk of offending in the future (Morgan, Leeson, Dillon, Wirgman, & Needham, 2013). However, when children stay in contact with their imprisoned parent through prison visiting, this seems to be a protective factor against these longer term impacts. Consequently, some describe prison visiting as a ‘critical intervention’ (Johnston, 1995, p.138). Where children remain in contact with their imprisoned father, for instance, studies show that the well-being of children is often higher than those children who do not visit. This may be because, amongst other things, visiting allows children to comprehend the context of their father’s imprisonment and allows them to be re-instated with their father ‘in-person’ rather than over the telephone or through letter (Codd, 2008; Johnston, 1995). Nonetheless, prison visits have generally declined over the past number of years (Broadhead, 2002; Salmon, 2005) and this has been attributed to a myriad of factors. Logistical difficulties faced by visitors accessing the prison are often cited, as is the cost of transportation (Woodall, Dixey, Green, & Newell, 2009). Reports that prison visitors may be treated as a nuisance, a disruption to the routine and perceived as a security threat by prison staff (Broadhead, 2002) does also seem to be a barrier. Furthermore, reductions in prison visiting numbers may be due to prisoners themselves requesting not to receive visits (Woodall, Dixey, & Kinsella, 2012). Indeed, it can be fairly common for prisoners not to allow their children to visit them in prison. This is often a conscious decision made between the prisoner and his partner in order to protect the feelings and welfare of the child (Dixey & Woodall, 2012). For example, in one study prisoners suggested that they had decided not to allow their children to visit them for fear of exposing them to convicted paedophiles in the visits room (Woodall, et al., 2012).

While Codd (2008, p152-153) has described prison visits as the ‘lynchpin of contact between prisoners and their families’, visits are often described as being uninspiring for children as they can become restless and agitated (Codd, 2008). Indeed, prison rules prohibit prisoners from physically embracing their children or for any meaningful play or interaction. This is because prison visits are frequently a route for illicit drugs to enter the institution (Woodall, 2012). However, research does show that where prisons allow extended visits, where children are more engaged in structured activities (these are sometimes common at Christmas time and during school holidays), the likelihood of consolidating and improving parent-child bonds is increased (Dixey & Woodall, 2012). Indeed, the Barnados organisation (2013), a British charity for vulnerable children and young people, has argued that prisons need to become more family focused. This has been reiterated by Miller (2006) who has

urged prisons to provide innovative services, such as enhanced visitation programmes that allow more time and contact between the prisoner and his/her child which may potentially alleviate the impact of parental incarceration. This aim of this paper is to report on the outcomes of one prison visit service and to discuss the impact the service had on prisoners' children, prisoners and families. The theoretical and practical application of playwork to the prison context is relatively under-developed. Yet, play has been advocated as a means to mediate the negative effects of parental imprisonment on children and as a resource for maintaining family ties (Hart & Clutterbrook, 2008).

The intervention, based at Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Leeds in the UK, is a play visits scheme with its intention to provide supervised play work provision for children visiting relations in prison. HMP Leeds is an adult male prison holding, at the last independent inspection, 1121 prisoners remanded or sentenced by the courts in West Yorkshire (HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons, 2013). Of the prisoners at HMP Leeds, 17% are serving from two years to less than four years in the prison and almost 2% are serving life sentences. Approximately 55% of men have a child under the age of 18 years (HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons, 2013).

The play visits scheme employs a qualified play worker in a designated play area facilitating supervised play between the prisoner and his child. The play visits service operates in school term-time and therefore the children utilising the service are between 0-5 years old. While the play visit takes place in a clearly designated area within the prison visits hall, the size of the play area means that only one family can utilise the service at a time. Data reveals that between September 2010 and March 2013, the play visits service attracted 1154 applications from prisoners and prisoners' families and this resulted in 725 completed play visits. Monitoring figures show that demand for the service is high and not all applications result in a play visit being granted. This issue, however, may need to be viewed in the context of managing a play visits service in a prison, where prisoners requesting the service need to be security checked and approved before a visit can be authorised. This can be a time-consuming process and not all of those prisoners requesting a play visit will be eligible due to their prior offence or background (Woodall & Kinsella, 2013). Within the play area there are an abundance of toys for varying age groups and other materials, such as paints, pens, an arts and craft station and board games.

Methodology

The use of triangulation has been proposed as a means of achieving validity in evaluation (Green & Tones, 1999) and is particularly relevant to this study. Data triangulation involves 'using diverse sources of data, so that one seeks out instances of a phenomena in several different settings, at different points in time or space' (Seale, 2004, p.77). Triangulation was achieved by comparing the findings derived from the use of different methods (focus groups, interviews, questionnaires) and from different stakeholder groups (i.e. prison visitors and prisoners). Ethical approval for these strands of activity was provided by the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at Leeds Metropolitan University. Once ethical approval was gained, permission to conduct the research was provided by senior management in the prison. Further details concerning the methodological approach with each group will be outlined in detail.

Prisoners' families

Understanding the adult visitors' perspective of the play visits service at the prison was a central component of the evaluation. Qualitative interviewing was used as a method to elicit visitor experiences and is recognised as being a valuable approach to understanding the process of prison visits (Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2011). During the data collection period of the evaluation, prison visitors that had regularly experienced play visits at the prison were approached to participate in a semi-structured interview with a member of

the evaluation team. The interview schedule covered areas including: the frequency at which the family had been using the play visits at HMP Leeds; whether/how play visits had made a difference to the visits experience; the benefits of the play visit for themselves and their perception of the benefit for their children and their partner; and any comparisons they could make between the provision at HMP Leeds *versus* other institutions they may have visited.

Nine female prison visitors were interviewed – in all cases they were the primary caregiver of the child and in most cases, these individuals were the wives of the men in prison. Interviews took place away from the visits area at the visitors' centre, so as not to disturb the family interaction or to impinge on the visiting time allocated. Interviews lasted between 20-40 minutes. A fundamental concern was ensuring that potential participants were able to give informed consent free from any pressure or perceived pressure. It was explained prior to interview that the researchers were independent of the prison. The aims of the research were explained as were issues of confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the interview at any point. Permission was granted by participants for the interviews to be audio recorded.

In addition to qualitative interviewing, a brief questionnaire was administered to those involved in play visits over a two-week period and was overseen by a member of staff from HMP Leeds. Completing the questionnaire was optional and individuals had the right to withdraw from the evaluation at any point. Fourteen adults completed the questionnaire which aimed to quantify any changes in perceived family connections as a result of the play visit, as well as ascertain quantitative data on individuals' satisfaction with the service. In addition to this, the older children involved in a play visit were also invited to complete a short 'draw and write' exercise. Children aged between 3-5 years were approached to participate as it was felt that those younger would be unable to complete the task. The draw and write approach is essentially a qualitative method for understanding how children construct ideas and concepts (Carter & Ford, 2013). The premise of the method is relatively straightforward in that children are invited to draw a picture and to write what is happening in the picture. Where children are unable to write for themselves, adults can act as scribes (Carter & Ford, 2013). The 'draw and write' technique has been used extensively to explore the perceptions of younger children for whom more traditional research methods may not be appropriate (Pridmore, 1996). Children were asked to draw a picture or write what they liked best about the play visit and to also draw a picture about what they liked least about the play visit. While six children completed drawings, the task was too difficult for the majority of children to complete and, in retrospect, an alternative means of collecting data should have been considered.

Prisoners

There is little consideration of prisoners' own views as they relate to family ties and the visits process (Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Mills, 2005), therefore this element of the evaluation was deemed essential in order to provide insight to the play visits service. Four prisoners who had experience of the play visits service voluntarily participated in a focus group after information had been distributed to eligible prisoners within HMP Leeds. It can be argued that focus groups are particularly appropriate in this research setting as focus groups can overcome potentially poor literacy levels reported as evident in the prison population. While audio recording evokes particular meaning for those who come into contact with the criminal justice system (as offenders will have been tape recorded as part of providing evidence for a criminal investigation (Noaks & Wincup, 2004)), all participants agreed to be recorded after permission was granted to use the equipment by the prison management, and all prisoners provided their consent. The focus group discussion focussed on the following broad issues:

- Whether play visits made a difference to visits with their family;
- Whether the play visits influenced family relationships;

- The benefits and drawbacks of the play visits service;
- The perceived role that visiting and contact with family would make to the resettlement process.

Data analysis

The qualitative analysis was conducted over a number of stages drawing on recognised principles (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After all data had been transcribed verbatim, members of the evaluation team (JW and KK) read and familiarised themselves with the content of the transcripts. Based on this, a coding framework was developed. This framework was derived from thematic areas of interest within the data. The coding framework was refined and agreed amongst the evaluation team and applied to the original transcripts to extract major themes. These thematic categories are presented below and include: positive outcomes for children; improved prisoner-child bonding; being a family again; not missing out on being a dad and not missing out on having a dad; and professional and sensitive play workers.

Findings

The findings revealed positive outcomes for prisoners, children and the wider family as a result of the play visits service. One prisoner who had served several custodial sentences described the play visits service as the ‘best thing’ the Prison Service has implemented since his incarceration. The following issues presented are those that emerged both through the qualitative and quantitative evidence. Where quotations have been used to illustrate issues, these have been anonymised to protect the participants.

Positive outcomes for children

Both prison visitors and prisoners noted how standard (non-play) visits could be difficult for children, as there was often little to engage them or occupy their time. Children could also become restless, bored and uninterested and this could detract from the overall visits experience for all concerned. However, for those families experiencing the play visits service, this situation was largely eradicated as children were engaged in purposeful play and activity:

“My child is at that age where she wants to crawl around and that visit [standard visit] becomes a struggle between me and my partner to keep her sat still. When she’s in the play visit she’s just happy and content and I get to bond with her and play with her...on the normal visit I can’t talk to my partner I can’t engage with my daughter.”
(Focus group, prisoner 1)

Children that responded to the draw and write task highlighted how they enjoyed playing games, colouring pictures and playing with the toys while visiting their father. Indeed adult prison visitors, suggested that their children relished and looked forward to the time with their father in the play visit and this encouraged regular and consistent visiting patterns:

‘The children enjoy it because they ask about it and children don’t ask about something if it’s not a fun time and they are enjoying it.’ (Interview, prison visitor 9).

In some cases, prison visitors suggested that their children had, for the first time, felt comfortable playing with their father and enjoying his company. This, it was felt, had been stimulated through the organised and carefully co-ordinated play activities delivered by the play worker. Participants reported tangible differences in the levels of bonding (i.e. holding, cuddling etc.) between the prisoner and child as a result of the service. Half of the questionnaire responses also indicated that as a result of the play visits service, stronger family bonds had been developed:

‘Yes I’ve seen a much stronger bond between [name of son] and his dad since being on play visits. He never used to sit and play but now he loves spending time playing

with his dad and his dad loves spending time playing with [name of son]. It has brought them a lot closer than what they were.' (Interview, prison visitor 2)

As a consequence of children enjoying the visits experience, several prisoners felt that they were more likely to want to stay in touch with their children during their sentence. This was set in contrast to standard visits, whereby their children being bored and uninterested was a disincentive to continue regular contact:

"If the play service wasn't there I wouldn't see my kids half as much, as they can be uncontrollable on a standard visit." (Focus group, prisoner 4)

It was suggested that the play facilities could minimise the effect of parental incarceration on children. Prisoners recited previous (standard) visits where their children had felt daunted and anxious when visiting the prison and in addition had found it difficult to leave their father once their visiting time had elapsed. This situation had been eradicated for some families experiencing the play visit:

"The good thing is that the kids leave and they're not crying, because they've had fun. You've not got those tears to deal with." (Focus group, prisoner 2)

The experience of the play visit was considered enjoyable and exciting, prisoners and visitors suggested that this tempered the prison environment and would potentially result in children not having any mental 'scars' as a result of visiting their father in prison:

'For me she's at an age where I don't think she will remember her dad was in prison. He's just been at work! But if she does remember hopefully all she will remember is having fun in the play area with her dad. She won't remember gates and keys and officers. Prison is not a nice place but hopefully that is what she will remember, having fun with her dad.' (Interview, prison visitor 3)

'The play visit takes their [the children's] mind off where they are...it goes a long way to help them cope with me being in here.' (Focus group, prisoner 1)

Improved prisoner-child bonding

An overwhelming theme emerging throughout the data was that play visits, in comparison to standard visits, enabled improved family connections and increased prisoner-child bonding. Within the play visits, prisoners perceived that they were under less surveillance by prison staff (although this was not the case as CCTV monitors all activities in the visits hall) which allowed for a more relaxed family experience:

"The atmosphere is relaxed and less formal, you forget you're on surveillance. It feels like it's just you and you kids, you don't have an officer breathing down your neck." (Focus group, prisoner 3)

"When you're in those play visits, you sometimes don't even think you're inside prison." (Focus group, prisoner 2)

Moreover, it was suggested that play visits allowed the prisoner and his child to have greater physical contact than standard visits, whereby fixed tables and chairs (necessary for security purposes and to restrict drugs entering the prison) made this more difficult. This physical connection was deemed important for bonding and for children to feel closer to their fathers:

'My children could just cuddle him' (Interview, prison visitor 4)

'The family get to do things together and spend that closer time together on a [play] visit instead of having a table in-between. The children feel closer and they can do things with their dad playing with toys or games. My children have benefitted from it.' (Interview, prison visitor 9)

Being able to have increased physical contact between the prisoner and child was reported by one visitor to be particularly important:

'My little boy would really look forward to it; he knew he was going in there with his dad. If he wasn't going in he'd be so upset, because his dad can lie down on the floor with him and stuff and play proper games.' (Interview, prison visitor 6)

Being a family again

The play visit allowed, albeit temporarily, for the family to be more substantially reconnected. This was summed up by two visitors:

'It just feels like you are part of a family again. It's not you and the kids versus a partner in prison; you are a family a mum, dad and your kids.' (Interview, prison visitor 7)

'It was just like we were a family again, like with him being at home.' (Interview, prison visitor 6)

Respondents suggested that the play visit felt 'normal', similar in many ways to the home environment, where family members could feel relaxed and more at ease. The family visit felt more 'natural' as a result of the relaxed atmosphere generated by the play worker:

'It's just the opportunity to interact, we're not sat at a table and it feels more natural. It's a better environment for my daughter being able to play with her dad.' (Interview, prison visitor 4)

It was suggested that the quality of visiting between the child/children and the prisoner was greatly improved through the play visits service, allowing the prisoner to learn more about his children through facilitated play activities. This was noted by one visitor:

'They have made a big difference, it's like on a normal visit [name of prisoner] doesn't get that bond with his son, not on a normal visit but when you are having a play visit it just gives them that bit of freedom to bond more and play more and he can watch his son do new things.' (Interview, prison visitor 2)

The questionnaire data also showed that the play visits allowed better quality family time during visits, as all respondents (100%) indicated this as an outcome from the play visit experience.

Not missing out on being a dad and not missing out on having a dad

One of the overarching themes was that the play visits service genuinely allowed prisoners to re-establish their role as a father. This was reported to have mutual benefits both for the prisoner to reconnect as a 'dad' and for the child/children to continue to have a father figure in their life. The benefits of this were summed up by two visitors:

'He bonded with his little boy. I had the baby while he was in HMP Leeds, he was a baby and now he's nearly one....He now knows who is dad is even though he's not at home.' (Interview, prison visitor 6)

'My children know who he is now and they know he is coming home. My little boy who is nearly one, he knows who is dad is now and that's through those visits. They are so beneficial.' (Interview, prison visitor 3)

One prisoner described how it was easy to become a 'stranger' to his children through being in prison. The play visits, however, alleviated this social distance between father and child:

'I'm not a stranger anymore, she knows who I am. It used to break my heart when she looked at me and didn't know who I was.' (Focus group, prisoner 3)

Prisoners suggested that the play visit allowed them to connect more closely as a parent and ensured that they were able to experience significant events in their children's life. This was described by one prisoner:

'I've got to experience milestones. Like in here I've missed the first time that she crawled and the steps she made, but I've seen her do that in the play visit and I've got to experience that in a nice environment. I wouldn't have been able to see that on a normal visit and that all makes you closer as a family. Before she would tell me

on the phone, you know, she's took her first steps and things but it just makes you more upset.' (Focus group, prisoner 1)

Professional and sensitive play workers

A theme running throughout much of the data gathered was the professionalism and sensitivity of the play workers. Quantitative data suggested that all of the adult sample either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the play visits were run well. While one playworker was currently in post, some families had experienced previous workers. Frequently, prisoners and visitors suggested how well-organised the sessions were and how the play workers understood when to intervene in order to facilitate interaction and when not to:

'She [play worker] is a good catalyst, she's got lots of good ideas and she gets you involved.' (Focus group, prisoner 2)

'Well they give you your space but at the same time they will make a fuss of my daughter and suggest things to do while we are in there like making cards and stuff like that.' (Interview, prison visitor 4)

This was reflected in the questionnaire data, where all respondents either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the play visits were run well.

The play workers were consistently described as being friendly and helpful and always willing to go 'the extra mile'. Furthermore, the families seemed to appreciate the consistency of seeing the same play workers during their visits. This provided a more personal and bespoke service:

'It's the personal manner; it's really nice because they build up a relationship with your kids. It's very nice, they smile.' (Interview, prison visitor 7)

'If we want her to she does if not she just sits at the side. I got on really well with her so she got activities ready for us that she knew we liked, what the children liked. She got the toys out and ready. They just couldn't do enough for you it were brilliant. To go to a prison and know that your children can go in that room, that little area and they are so welcoming as well. You don't have that in any other jail.' (Prison visitor 6)

Discussion

The literature discussing the application of playwork to the prison context is relatively scant, with small-scale or short observational accounts contributing to the current evidence base (Hart & Clutterbrook, 2008; Ronay, 2011; Tamminen, 1999). This paper, although based on a modest sample in one prison, adds to the current literature of play in prison. Perhaps the most salient findings from the study was the perceived impact that the play visits service had on children visiting HMP Leeds and the envisaged benefits of the play visits in relation to maintaining family ties. While these are clearly overlapping issues, they will be discussed separately with implications for policy, practice and further investigation being highlighted.

Play as a means to support and encourage children's prison visitation

The data presented here suggests that the play visits service made the process of visiting the prison environment less daunting for children, encouraged regular visitation patterns and allowed the children to relax and play with their father in a safe and highly-professional environment. This finding is particularly important, as research shows that visiting numbers to prison are on the decline and this may be because children find prison visiting frightening (Pugh, 2004).

Play visits, for the majority of those families involved in this study, produced positive health and social outcomes for their children. This supports earlier findings based in other establishments where play facilities have been developed (Hart & Clutterbrook, 2008; Tamminen, 1999). These relationships fostered within the prison may be effective in

maintaining and strengthening longer-term family relations. This current study illuminates how play visits potentially produce stronger positive effects in comparison to standard prison visits, where opportunities for informal interaction and supervised play cannot be accessed. Further comparative work, however, is needed to explore this hypothesis. The evaluation demonstrates that through professionally facilitated play experiences, children were able to rearrange their worlds whilst prison-visiting to make them either 'less intimidating' or 'less boring' (Sutton-Smith, 1999). Through play, the data suggests that children felt increasingly in control of their visit; for example being able to spontaneously embrace or touch their father without the barrier of fixed tables or chairs (Dixey & Woodall, 2012). In some instances, it was suggested by parents that the play service minimised the psychological harm that may be caused through visiting the prison environment. One prisoner, for instance, suggested that the play service helped his child 'cope' with the situation. Positive outcomes as a result of the play visit service were also reported in relation to strengthening bonds between the child and his/her father (prisoner). The means by which the play visits service strengthened these ties were multi-factorial, but can be summarised under these key processes:

- Allowing increased physical contact;
- Engaging children through play created 'less-stress' during visits and provided a 'better quality' family experience;
- Providing prisoners with a genuine opportunity to re-establish their parental role, allowing them to feel more connected not disengaged from family life.

Play and their wider impact on maintaining family ties and improving resettlement

The Prison Service and other agencies working with prisoners recognise the value of maintaining family ties as the evidence overwhelmingly shows positive health and social effects when family contact is maintained (Cochran & Mears, 2013). While it is recognised that it may not always be in the best interest for families to stay connected during imprisonment (i.e. in the case of child abuse, domestic violence etc.), the data from the evaluation does suggest that a play visits service may be a contributing factor for families maintaining contact.

While this small-scale evaluation was unable to measure long-term outcomes as a result of the play visits service, research has consistently shown that prisoners' families, especially children, represent a rich source of social capital for offenders and play a critical role in individuals desisting from crime and reintegrating successfully back into the community (Ditchfield, 1994; Holt & Miller, 1972; Mills & Codd, 2008; Niven & Stewart, 2005). For example families and children provide 'bonding' ties for prisoners through social and practical support but also 'bridging' ties as we know that many opportunities for employment for offenders after imprisonment arise from informal networks and through family friends (Mills, 2005). The causal pathway from improved family contact during imprisonment to reductions in reoffending and improved resettlement is complex and non-linear. However, the literature reports that a child in a prisoner's life can become 'something to say no for' (Mills, 2005), especially in terms of resisting drugs and participating in other impulsive activities while in prison. Through consistent family contact in prison, prisoners may adopt less fatalistic attitudes and begin to recognise the role they need to perform in order to become a parent. Prisoners' prior attitudes, beliefs and actions, frequently underpinned by an egocentric approach to life, can shift towards being more rational and less self-absorbed as a result of contact with their children (Woodall, 2010). Clearly, therefore, a play service which actively fosters these parental bonds can potentially temper prisoners' self-interest toward more positive attributes that may equip him for successful reintegration.

It is hypothesised that the play visits service in prison can be a powerful instrument for behaviour change, explained by Howard Becker's (1963) theory of 'master' and 'subordinate' statuses, terms originally derived from the work of Everett Hughes (1945). Becker stated that once an individual had been successfully labelled (i.e. prisoner), he/she is subjected to

the positive and negative influences of that label. This label subsequently becomes the individual's 'master status' or the dominant feature of that person's identity. So, by promoting the status of 'parent' through the play visits service the positive characteristics which typify parenting are internalised over the (negative) characteristics of being labelled as a prisoner. This enables part of the prisoner identity to be tempered from the individual whilst in prison and replaced with other socially responsible roles which would assist in reintegrating back into society once released.

Play visits in prison: implications for future policy, practice and research

Play visits remain infrequent throughout prison institutions and facilities are not configured to accommodate the needs of children. Future policy and practice should consider the implications of prison visits in maintaining family ties and consider the evidence from this research that these visits are more effective than standard visits. Scholars, like Maruna et al. (2004), have criticised contemporary prison systems for fostering 'stagnation' rather than 'generativity' (Erikson, 1982), i.e. '*...the ability to transcend the immediate self-related interests of the person in favour of a view of generations to come*' (1995, p.291), arguing that prison can confine individuals to a state of adolescence and immaturity. Our argument is that a focus on generativity, created by the play visits service, is an important concept in desistance from crime. Indeed, Maruna (2001) has demonstrated that desisters, rather than persisters, are significantly more likely to express generative themes (e.g. responsibility for children) in their narratives. We would welcome a broader debate by prison governors and policy-makers on the function of the prison visit and to consider the role of play in fostering a myriad of positive outcomes for individuals, families and wider society.

Inevitably, scholars conclude papers by advocating for further research efforts; however, this is an area that desperately demands further attention to demonstrate the potential 'added value' of such a service. Future research should attempt to explore the children's perspective further; this study made a valid attempt to gather the views of children but this proved methodologically challenging in the time available to conduct the research. A greater focus on quantitative outcomes as a result of play visits, including impact on reoffending rates and children's well-being is also clearly needed. This may, however, require a quasi-experimental design (Johnston, 2012) which may be challenging in this context. Few studies have gathered the views of prison staff on their perception of play in the prison, although tentative findings from elsewhere suggest that their perceptions are positive of such a service (Tamminen, 1999). Further exploration of the issues, however, would merit future investigation. Finally, a more nuanced view of the play visit itself would contribute greatly to future efforts in this area. For example, does the timing of the play visit matter (i.e. at the start of the prisoner's sentence or at the end, or both)? Do sporadic play visits sessions have the same effects as more consistent and regular arrangements? Conceptual frameworks have been developed to guide research efforts in this area and these can be useful to better understand the prison visits experience (Cochran & Mears, 2013).

Conclusions

This paper has reported on a play visits service delivered at HMP Leeds. The authors are acutely aware that the views expressed by participants may not be representative of all of those families accessing the play service. The study did not set out to seek generalisable findings or definitive truths, but instead to capture the views of the service using the voices of prisoners and their families.

Data derived from a range of sources suggest that play visits may produce positive health and social outcomes for children and could be effective in maintaining and strengthening family ties. These effects may be stronger when compared to standard prison visits. Despite the apparent homogeneity, prisons are heterogeneous and vary dramatically in terms of their function, security level and governance. While further research is necessary to

determine the true impact of play visits in prison, this study shows that there is clear potential to expand the notion of playwork in prison despite the differences between establishments to benefit prisoners, children and families. These impacts are potentially considerable for society and may contribute to significant cost savings in terms of reduced re-offending and improved family and child outcomes.

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